

Coins

Security: A priceless problem

By Roger Boye

EVEN THE nation's premier coin experts are not immune to the mundane problems encountered by ordinary collectors.

For instance, security is an ongoing concern for Elvira and Vladimir Clain-Stefanelli, longtime curators of the Smithsonian Institution's division of numismatics.

"Despite the many alarm systems at the museum, we're always thinking about protection. We can't be too careful," said Mrs. Clain-Stefanelli, a 22-year Smithsonian veteran. She and her husband are responsible for the most valuable numismatic collection in the United States, a priceless accumulation of nearly 800,000 coins, currency, and other money-related pieces.

About 1 per cent of the items, including many rarities, are displayed on the third floor of the National Museum of History and Technology in Washington, D.C. As many as 40,000 persons a day visit that Smithsonian building during the summer tourist crunch.

Electronic devices protect the treasures on display, and a guard is usually present in the numismatic exhibit area. Some display cases are even equipped with vibrators that sound an alarm if the cases are hit hard.

"Fortunately, we haven't been held up yet, and we want to keep it that way," Mrs. Clain-Stefanelli said, tapping her knuckles on a wood chair.

The bulk of the "Ft. Knox-type collection" is stored in a large, room-sized vault in the numismatic division's offices on the museum's fourth floor. Working

in this limited-access area, the two curators, assisted by five aides, plan exhibits and catalog donated items.

Mrs. Clain-Stefanelli, who was born in Romania, organizes many of the displays, usually using historic or esthetic themes. She has learned that most tourists want to see "nice-looking exhibits they can relate to without much effort."

The Clain-Stefanellis received much of their "numismatic education" while working for several European museums and universities before World War II. They were married in 1938 and spent part of the war imprisoned in Buchenwald, the Nazi concentration camp. After the war they moved to Italy, where Clain-Stefanelli, an Austrian native, was a coin consultant to firms in Rome and New York.

When the couple joined the Smithsonian staff in the 1950s, they set out to expand what then was the museum's 65,000-item coin and currency collection. Their efforts have helped to secure several major donations, including a 6,125-piece gold coin collection in 1968 and, more recently, the Chase Manhattan Bank money collection, with its many rare examples of currency used by primitive peoples. (Mrs. Clain-Stefanelli recently completed a 36-page pamphlet on the Chase collection, one of several publications written by her or her husband.)

Despite the tremendous increase in the size of the collection during the "Clain-Stefanelli years," the museum still has gaps to fill, even in its U.S. holdings. For example, the Smithsonian lacks several coins from U.S. branch mints and certain types of currency.